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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 BAGHDAD 001262

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [IR](#) [IZ](#)  
SUBJECT: IRAN MANAGING THE POST-BASRAH BACKLASH

REF: A. BAGHDAD 977  
[1](#)B. BAGHDAD 1051  
[1](#)C. BAGHDAD 1045  
[1](#)D. BAGHDAD 1052  
[1](#)E. BAGHDAD 1080  
[1](#)F. BAGHDAD 1147  
[1](#)G. BAGHDAD 1033  
[1](#)H. BAGHDAD 1027

Classified By: Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (S) SUMMARY: In the aftermath of Jaish al-Mahdi (JAM) and its Special Group offshoots (JAM-SG) targeting ISF in Basrah with Iranian-provided weaponry March 23 to 30, Iraqi government officials are talking more about the need to confront Iran about its support for illegal militias in Iraq. Iran has denied charges of militia support and also sought, in a charm offensive, to convince Iraqi leaders of its desire to work with the GOI and the U.S. -- via trilateral talks -- to enhance security. Iran may try to keep indirect fire attacks (IDF) against the International Zone (IZ) at a relatively low level for the time being, in light of Iranian government spokesman Hosseini's recent condemnation of IDF attacks on the IZ as an attack against the GOI. Daily rocket attacks have continued, but at a substantially lower pace. (Comment: This may have more to do with coalition strikes on JAM rocket crews than any Iranian effort at restraint. End Comment.) Iran has labeled recent USG public comments on the danger of Iranian support to Iraqi militias as a function of domestic U.S. politics and a "shameful" effort to justify its failed Iraq policies, accusing the U.S. of fostering political strife in Iraq. This increased GOI consensus on and anger at Iranian malign influence is unlikely to last at current levels, depending to some extent on how adroitly Iran deflects accusations. It also depends on how the Maliki government continues its offense against JAM. Even though the PM was indeed angered by Iran's support of JAM, he is still wary of taking an overtly anti-Iranian stance. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (C) This analytical cable on changes in Iraq's Iran policy post-Basrah and Iran's reaction to these changes is based on previous Embassy Baghdad reporting, and was written by the Political-Military section's recently-created Iran Task Force.

Iran's Role In Recent Violence  
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[1](#)3. (S) GOI officials with the Prime Minister (PM) during the late-March Basrah operations told Pol-Mil Minister-Counselor that they believed Iran helped replenish weapons stocks of JAM-SG and other forces fighting ISF. Iraqi officials have similar suspicions about JAM-Special Groups in Baghdad. Nevertheless, after a succession of Iraqi leaders reached out to the IRI, Iran reportedly played a role in bringing about

the cease-fire, putting pressure on Muqtada al-Sadr to issue his March 31 statement. (Ref G)

#### Frustration with Iran

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14. (S) Despite Iran's role in ending the violence, post-Basrah there appears to be an increased conviction among GOI leaders that Iran is acting against the best interests of Iraq and that something must be done both about JAM and Iran, reflected in recent conversations with Emboffs. In fact, Iran's perceived ability to turn up or down the violence has further angered GOI officials.

- On March 29, PM Political advisor Sadiq Rikabi said the Iranians were seeking to sow chaos in Iraq in order to gain control of the south, and possibly to provide Tehran leverage with which to negotiate a deal with the U.S. (Ref A)

- On April 1, VP al-Hashemi said that Iran's interference in Iraqi affairs was unacceptable, and that if Tehran's behavior toward Iraq did not change, Iraq and its allies should take reciprocal steps to punish Tehran. Iraq must act in concert with the U.S. and Arab allies to confront Iranian interference in Iraq, responding in kind if Tehran takes harmful steps - there could no longer be business as usual. (Ref B)

- On April 3, President Talabani, VP Abd al-Mahdi, and DPM Barham Salih stressed there was a new sense of unity among GOI leaders which was required to defeat extremists and stand up to neighbors.

- On April 5, PM Maliki acknowledged the need for Iraq's

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disparate political parties to speak with one voice to the Iranians. (Ref D) Maliki Advisor Sami al-Askari said that Basrah events had shown clearly that Iran is playing a "very negative" role in Iraq and has a deeply entrenched intelligence network here. FM Zebari suggested that someone senior from Washington come to Iraq and convince all of the leaders to sign a position paper with the message, "enough is enough."

- On April 5, the PCNS issued a statement in which one point condemned "foreign interference in Iraqi affairs" and asked "the international community to assist Iraq in deterring neighboring countries that are still interfering in its internal affairs and still exerting their utmost efforts to undermine its stability and security." VP Hashemi, who drafted the statement, said he had sought a strong condemnation of Iran by name, but was unable to achieve consensus.

- On April 6, Council of Representatives (CoR) Speaker Mashadani told Embassy interlocutors he was increasingly concerned about Iranian influence in Iraq, complaining that the Sadrist, who seemed to owe more loyalty to Tehran than to Baghdad, were being used by the Iranians. He and FM Zebari had agreed to stand together against Iranian influence. (Ref E)

- On April 10, Sadiq al-Rikabi, political advisor to the Prime Minister, said that Iran's arming, training, and supplying militant groups must stop and said the government is sending this message. (Ref F)

- On April 12, VP Hashemi said "a very tough approach and hard line toward Tehran is needed." It should be made clear to all what Iran is doing to our country." Iran's interference into Iraqi affairs was unacceptable and must be repulsed. "there could no longer be business as usual; if the Iranians do something negative in Iraq, we must take "reciprocal steps to punish them." (Ref D)

¶5. (S) Although Iran is a regular source of logistical support to JAM, it may have contributed to brokering a Sadr stand-down, possibly out of concern that ISF with CF assistance could defeat the JAM, as well as to turn aside Iraqi ire at Iran's role in arming the militias. Sadr issued a nine-point statement on March 30 that helped bring an end to the violence.

¶6. (S) Iran and al-Sadr are now trying to deflect blame for the recent violence, including onto each other. On April 15, Dawa Bloc leader Ali al-Adib said during the late-March UIA talks with Iranian officials in Tehran, the Iranians first denied but later admitted they provided assistance to JAM, followed by a claim that all support stopped immediately after President Ahmadinejad's March visit to Baghdad. However, during the early-April UIA visit to Tehran, Iran reportedly hotly denied that they supplied such assistance, demanding evidence. (Ref G) Al-Adib told Emboffs that the UIA will not pursue the matter because the GOI has taken up the case and is preparing a formal accusation "supported by proof" which it will present to Iran. Separately, senior Dawa Party official Haidar al-Abadi told Emboffs Iran was convinced that the Basrah operation was the product of a plot between the USG and Maliki to destroy the Sadrists. (Ref H) Meanwhile, Muqtada al-Sadr confidant Ibrahim al-Sumaydai told Emboffs on April 8 that the Sadrist leadership blamed Iran for instigating the recent violence in Basrah to further its own agenda. Rationales included ensuring its true allies (Da'wa and ISCI) win October's provincial elections, establishing a nine-province Shia region, creating a chaotic atmosphere to hurt Senator McCain's presidential prospects, and decreasing U.S. popular support for the American presence in Iraq.

¶7. (S) Seeking to repair relations with Iraq, Iran has renewed efforts to convince the GOI and the USG that all three "share the same goals in Iraq." President Talabani in an early April conversation speculated that Iran was afraid of losing its influence in Iraq due to Shia-on-Shia violence starting with the bloody events in Karbala in August 2007 which led to backlash among the Iraqi Shia - which seems to be growing, following recent militia violence. He also speculated that Iran is realizing that its affiliation with JAM and the Sadrists is not paying off.

¶8. (S) Another Iranian tactic is to invite many political players to Tehran for talks. Ahmed Chalabi, Ibrahim

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al-Jafri, Abdel Aziz al-Hakim, Dawa's Falih al-Fayadh and Ali al-Adib, and Shia independent Qassim Daoud have all either been to or are planning travel, among others. The message, taken from the Syrian-Iranian playbook in Lebanon, is that Iran can solve problems and create them.

¶9. (SBU) On April 8, for the first time an IRI spokesman denounced the IZ IDF attacks and praised GOI efforts against criminal elements. MFA spokesman Hosseini said:

- "from the IRI viewpoint, attacks on Baghdad's Green Zone, the seat of Iraqi government organizations and institutions and diplomatic centers, are severely condemned."

- "lawful GOI measures to confront illegally armed groups was an approach for establishing security and stability"

Blame U.S.  
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¶10. (SBU) Publicly, Iran has sought to maintain the rhetorical offensive in its own media, blaming the U.S. for the very same destructive acts that the U.S. is charging it with. Immediately following Ambassador Crocker and CG

Petraeus' Congressional testimony which included condemnation of Iran's malign influence in Iraq, Iran predictably answered accusations with counter-accusations.

- In an April 9 statement, MFA spokesman Hosseini said that the testimony was a "shameful effort" to justify the failures of America's wrong policies in Iraq. In an April 13 press conference, Hosseini said that "U.S. accusations against other countries won't help the U.S. escape the maelstrom in Iraq."

- An April 10 editorial in Iran's ultra-conservative 'Kayhan' newspaper, titled "Iran and Iraq's Occupiers," said that the U.S. seeks to "create division amongst the Shia, Sunni and Kurd militias," and among various influential Shia groups, in an attempt to weaken the Maliki government and to bring back Baathist elements to power. Saying that the Bush administration "badly needs to talk to Iran," it claimed that by increasing anti-Iranian accusations it seeks to weaken Iran's position in the run-up to the fourth round of negotiations. It claimed President Bush, having seen his Middle East plans fail due to Iran, is "ready to do anything to survive politically," and is ready to use "a mix of diplomacy, negotiations, pressure, force and threat to revive its prestige and reputation in front of public opinion."

- An April 13 lead editorial in the conservative 'Jomhouri Islami' newspaper affiliated with Supreme Leader Khamenei claimed that "the continuation of the killing of defenseless Iraqis especially in Sadr City and the bombing of Basrah show that the conservatives have a new plan for continuing the war in Iraq... they have chosen the way of crushing the people militarily." Elsewhere, it accuses the U.S. of using private security companies to smuggle modern arms to train and equip terrorists and ethnic minorities in Iraq.

¶11. (S) COMMENT: It is unclear how long this newfound relative GOI unity of purpose in confronting Iran will last, but it may dissipate in the lead-up to provincial elections, as factional politics again comes to the fore. Even though the PM was angered by Iran's support of JAM, he is likely still wary of being pushed by the U.S. into an overtly anti-Iranian stance and is taking pains not to burn bridges with the Iranians. For example, during the PM's recent visit to Brussels he complained the neighbors "weren't helping," but only FM Zebari pointed to Iran. The Iranian government will likely continue a diplomatic "charm offensive" against the GOI while also maintaining a steady stream of public counter-accusations against the USG. The recent increased USG spotlight on Iranian support to Iraqi militias will also weigh on Iran's decision on how to calibrate its support for violent and destabilizing acts in Iraq. It may try to keep IDF attacks against the IZ at a relatively low (i.e. pre-March 23) level for the time being, in light of Iranian government spokesman Hosseini's recent condemnations of IZ attacks as against the GOI. Nonetheless, the IZ is still receiving daily attacks, though at a lesser pace. However, GOI action against JAM could change Iran's calculus. Iran could feel it has to maintain a certain level of lethal support for JAM and JAM-SG both to preserve JAM's utility as a counter against ISCI/Badr predominance, and to appease those Sadristes who made their bed with Tehran despite their nationalist ideology in order to receive such lethal support.

END COMMENT.  
CROCKER